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Adult attachment and psychosocial functioning

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Introduction: Theoretical background

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) provides the framework for the current thesis. Therefore, in this introductory chapter, a résumé of relevant aspects of attachment theory and close relationships will be given. We will begin with a historical description of attachment theory and its' development, and venture onward to the topic of measurement of attachment, and the aims for this thesis.

Origins of attachment

Attachment theory has been claimed to be '*one of the broadest, most profound, and most creative lines of research in 20th century psychology*' (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). One need only conduct a literature search on the topic of 'attachment' to find that the last 25 years have witnessed a growing interest in the field of attachment. More than 6000 articles on attachment have been published, alongside several handbooks and a scientific journal aimed specifically at studies based on attachment theory. The growing interest in attachment theory is not surprising considering the fact that it is a life-span theory that attempts to explain human behavior '*from the cradle to the grave*' (Bowlby, 1969, p.208).

Attachment theory is rooted in psychoanalytic theory, and combines insights from several disciplines, such as psycho-analysis, ethology, biology and developmental psychology. The trilogy Attachment, Separation and Loss, written by John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) is considered to be the theoretical groundwork of attachment theory. Central theme of attachment theory is the nature of a child's tie to his or her primary caregiver (or 'attachment figure'), which is considered to be of vital importance to current and later psychological functioning.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) postulates a universal human need to form close affectional bonds (or attachments) to other human beings. Bowlby

theorized that human beings possess a biologically based ‘attachment system’ that is directed at maintaining a balance between seeking attachment security and exploring the environment. When an individual feels threatened, anxious or (emotionally) upset, the attachment system will be activated. The primary (innate) strategy for dealing with attachment system activation is to seek proximity to an ‘attachment figure’, that is someone deemed able to provide comfort and support in these stressful circumstances, in order to regain a sense of security. However, secondary attachment strategies may develop when the primary strategy appears to fail (Main, 1990; Schachner, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005). Individual differences in the way the attachment need is expressed stem from the experiences one has had with caregivers in childhood. Security of attachment develops when bids for attachment have been consistently met because the attachment figure is available and responsive to the child’s attachment needs. In securely attached children, the direct and open expression of negative affect communicates distress to the caregiver, who then responds with positive action to relieve the child’s distress (Belsky & Isabella, 1988; Bowlby, 1969; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). Insecurity of attachment is developed as a secondary (conditional) strategy in response to either rejecting or inconsistent caregiving. In case of an unresponsive caregiver, such as a parent who is unlikely to react to pronounced signals of distress, a deactivating strategy may develop. Individuals learn to conceal their distress and actively deny their need for attachment in order to avoid the anticipated painful consequence of expressing their attachment needs (Bowlby, 1988b; Dozier & Kobak, 1992; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). In case of the inconsistently responsive caregiver, a hyperactivating strategy may develop in which individuals learn to maximize expressions of distress in order to attain proximity to attachment figures and ensure their attention and support (Crittenden, 1995; Dozier, Stovall & Albus, 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978) provided essential empirical support for attachment theory. In extensive observational studies (first in Uganda and later in Baltimore) a category system was developed to distinguish individual differences in attachment behaviour. Originally, this category system distinguished one secure and two insecure ‘attachment styles’, later an additional insecure category was added (Main & Solomon, 1986).

Attachment behaviour in young children is assessed by a laboratory procedure called the 'Strange Situation', which was designed to elicit attachment behaviours in a stressful situation through repeated separations from an attachment figure and interaction with a stranger, and also to elicit exploratory behaviour by offering a multitude of attractive toys. Children's reactions towards the attachment figure (usually one of the parents) during separations and reunions allows differentiation of the children into four groups. Securely attached children might be a little distressed when their caregiver leaves the room, but upon reunion they are easily soothed and resume playing. Insecure-avoidant children are characterized by a deactivating strategy. They hardly show any distress when their caregiver leaves the room, and tend to seek little contact with their caregiver upon reunion, seemingly concentrating on toys rather than the caregiver. In contrast, insecure-ambivalent children are characterized by a hyperactivating strategy. They become very distressed when they are separated from their caregiver and are extremely difficult to comfort upon reunion, clinging to their caregiver and barely noticing toys. The fourth insecure category was added by Main and Solomon (1986) because children did not always fit into one of the three existing categories. Children in the insecure-disorganized category lack a clear behavioural strategy and seem to endorse both avoidant and ambivalent strategies upon reunion with their caregiver. Research has shown that these children are most vulnerable to the development of psychopathology (Crittenden, 1995; LyonsRuth & Jacobvitz, 1999; Main & Solomon, 1986).

Attachment beyond infancy

Attachment behaviour is most visible in infancy and childhood, but continues to be of importance throughout the lifespan, especially in times of need. As the child matures, the accumulated experiences in relationships with caregivers lead to the development of mental representations or 'internal working models of attachment' (Bowlby, 1988b; Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). Initially, internal working models of attachment consist of expectations about the (emotional) availability and approachability of the caregiver in stressful situations. Eventually the child abstracts from these expectations a set of postulates about how close relationships operate and will come to see itself as worthy or unworthy of love and support, and others as dependable or undependable.

Through years of interaction with the caregivers, accompanied by repetitive experiences, the child will master a working model that is resistant to dramatic change. As Bowlby, (1988a, p.130) puts it: *'This means that the patterns of interaction to which the models lead, having become habitual, generalized, and largely unconscious, persist in a more or less uncorrected and unchanged state even when the individual in later life is dealing with persons who treat him in ways entirely unlike those that his parents adopted when he was a child.'*

Eventually, internal working models of attachment are expected to become a core feature of an individual's personality structure, a so-called attachment style. Theoretically, attachment styles influence a person's expectations, emotions, defences and relational behaviour in all subsequent attachment relationships (Collins & Read, 1994; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). The stability and continuity of adult attachment will be discussed in more detail later on in this introductory chapter.

Adult attachment

Despite Bowlby's claims that attachment behaviour plays a vital role throughout the life cycle and his extensive writings about attachment processes in adulthood (see Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1988a, 1988b), the attachment perspective on adult relationships did not become an active area of research until the mid-1980's. In two independent research traditions, the possibility that the effects of childhood attachment relationships extend into adulthood was investigated, both in the domain of parenting and in the domain of romantic relationships (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 1998).

In the first line of research, which is rooted in developmental psychology and psychiatry, Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) investigated in what way adults' 'state of mind regarding attachment' (i.e. adults' current representations of their childhood relationships with parents) affected their parenting behaviour. Main et al. (1985) documented that the way in which adults discussed their past relationships with their parents was systematically linked to the attachment classification of their own infants in the Strange Situation. Using a semi-structured interview called the 'Adult Attachment Interview' (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1984, which will be discussed in more detail in the measurement section), individuals were asked to reflect on their childhood experiences with parents. Similar to the classifications of infants in the

Strange Situation, three adult attachment classifications could be discerned: 'Secure' individuals produced credible, clear and coherent accounts of their relationship with their parents, regardless of the valence of these experiences (i.e. whether it concerned positive or negative experiences with parents), and tended to have infants who were secure in the Strange Situation classification. Individuals who were dismissing of attachment related memories and feelings tended to describe parents in highly idealized terms but were unable to recall specific memories. 'Dismissing' adults tended to have infants who were insecure-avoidant in the Strange Situation. 'Preoccupied' individuals often displayed intense, ongoing anger towards their parents, they had easily accessible memories but their accounts tended to be excessively long and incoherent, and they often strayed away from AAI questions. Preoccupied individuals tended to have children classified as insecure-ambivalent in the Strange Situation. In 1990 an additional 'Unresolved' category was added for adults who remained unresolved about traumatic events in their past. These adults usually have infants that are insecure-disorganized in the Strange Situation.

In a combined (meta-analytical) sample of 584 nonclinical mothers, the distribution of attachment styles in adults was similar to the distribution found in infant studies on attachment: 58% of the nonclinical mothers were classified as secure, 24% were dismissing and 18% were preoccupied. With the unresolved category included, the distribution was 55% secure, 16% dismissing, 9% preoccupied and 19% unresolved (for a review on research with the AAI see Hesse, 1999).

In a second, independent line of research stemming from social psychology and research on individual differences, Hazan and Shaver (1987) argued that romantic love can be conceptualized as an attachment process. Following up on Weiss's (1973) idea that chronic loneliness is associated with insecure attachment, Hazan and Shaver (1987) stated that variations in early social experience produce relatively lasting differences in relationship styles, and that the three major attachment styles described in the infant literature (i.e. secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure-ambivalent) are manifested in adult romantic relationships. Based upon Ainsworth's three patterns of childhood attachment, Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed a self-report measure of adult attachment, which consisted of three paragraphs that intended to capture the main features associated with the three attachment styles. The secure description

emphasizes trust and comfort with closeness, while the insecure-avoidant description highlights reluctance to trust and a preference for maintaining emotional distance. The insecure-ambivalent description portrays lack of confidence in the availability of the partner and a strong, unsatisfied desire for emotional closeness. Consistent with predictions based on attachment theory, the frequencies of the three adult attachment styles were similar to those found in studies on infant attachment: approximately 50% of the individuals rated themselves as secure, 25% were insecure-avoidant and 20% were insecure-ambivalent. Furthermore, the three attachment groups differed in their reports of childhood experiences with parents and their experiences in romantic relationships.

In contrast to research in the developmental domain which lies predominately in the realm of parenting behaviour, the bulk of research in the field of social psychology and individual differences focuses on the influence of adult attachment styles on personal adjustment and adult romantic relationships. As will be discussed in more detail below, the first empirical studies by Hazan and Shaver (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver, Hazan & Bradshaw, 1988) generated a host of other studies relating adult attachment to theoretically relevant personality variables, behaviours and experiences in close relationships (for reviews see Feeney, 1999; Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Measurement of attachment in adults

Because the development of the field of adult attachment is so strongly intertwined with the measurement of adult attachment, further developments in the field of adult attachment will be explicated in view of the measurement of adult attachment.

Different aspects of attachment theory and adult relationships have led to a variety of attachment measures intending to measure attachment in adults. All these measures purport to measure the same construct, adult attachment, but they define and measure attachment in different ways (for reviews see Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Crowell, Treboux & Waters, 1999; Shaver, Belsky & Brennan, 2000; Stein, Jacobs, Ferguson, Allen & Fonagy, 1998).

Two mainstreams can be identified in the measurement of adult attachment which stem from the abovementioned research traditions in adult attachment. Within the context of developmental psychology and psychiatry, interview measures have been

developed, such as the Adult Attachment Interview, (AAI; George, Kaplan & Main, 1984; Main & Goldwyn, 1998). The AAI is a semi-structured interview that addresses individuals' experiences in primary attachment relationships and the way these experiences have affected them. The verbatim transcripts of the interview are rated on various scales by expert coders and ultimately classified as secure or insecure. The emphasis is on coherence and accessibility of representations rather than the actual content of experiences. The domain of attachment representations is the 'overall state of mind' regarding attachment issues either involving the early parent-child relationships (AAI) or domain specific on the basis of information involving the current romantic partner (CRI; Owens, Crowell, Pan, Treboux, O'Connor, & Waters, 1995).

In the context of social psychology and research on individual differences, various self-report measures for adult attachment were developed. The initial self-report developed by Hazan and Shaver (1987) was soon followed by more refined measures of adult attachment. Considering the methodological limitations of a single-item self-report scale, researchers subsequently developed multi-item scales based on the three paragraphs in Hazan and Shavers' original questionnaire. Examples of these are the Adult Attachment Scale (Simpson, 1990), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990), and the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney, Noller and Callan, 1994). In contrast to the interview techniques these measures ask directly about attitudes and behaviours and they usually focus on one particular relationship domain, mostly adult romantic attachment.

An ongoing debate about the assets and liabilities of different attachment measures remains (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Crowell, Fraley & Shaver, 1999; Crowell & Treboux, 1995; Crowell, Treboux & Waters, 1999; Fraley & Waller, 1998; Gerlsma & Luteijn, 2000; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Shaver, Belsky & Brennan, 2000; Stein et al., 1998), but most adult attachment researchers agree that both self-reports and interview methods are valid and reliable ways of measuring different aspects of adult attachment (Crowell et al., 1999; Stein et al., 1998).

In 1990, Bartholomew reviewed the adult attachment literature and came to the conclusion that the two traditions of adult attachment differed in their formulations of the insecure-avoidant attachment style: the dismissing individuals identified by the

AAI deny the experience of subjective distress and downplay the importance of attachment needs whereas the avoidant individuals identified by Hazan and Shaver (1987) report relatively high levels of distress and have an acute fear of becoming close to others. Bartholomew (1990) therefore argued that two distinct patterns of avoidance could be discerned, one pattern motivated by a defensive maintenance of self-sufficiency (dismissing avoidants) and the other motivated by a conscious fear of anticipated rejection by others (fearful avoidants). Building on both traditions, Bartholomew postulated an extended, four-group model of adult attachment that includes two forms of avoidance.

Bowlby's (1973, p.238) conception that internal working models of attachment consist of two complementary and mutually confirming variables, i.e. the model of self *'whether or not the self is judged to be the sort of person towards whom anyone and the attachment figure in particular is likely to respond in a helpful way'* and the model of the attachment figure *'whether or not the attachment figure is judged to be the sort of person who in general responds to calls for support and protection'* was taken as a starting point for development of the four group model of adult attachment.

		Model of Self (dependance)	
		Positive (low)	Negative (high)
Model of other (avoidance)	Positive (low)	Secure Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	Preoccupied Overly dependent, Preoccupied with relationships
	Negative (high)	Dismissing Dismissing of intimacy, Counter-dependent	Fearful Fearful of intimacy, Socially avoidant

Figure 1.1: Four-group model of adult attachment

By systematizing Bowlby's conception of internal working models of attachment, individual differences in attachment were defined in terms of the intersection of two

dimensions: positivity of models of self and positivity of models of others (see Figure 1.1).

The positivity of the self model indicates the degree to which a person has internalized a sense of his or her self-worth (versus feeling anxious and uncertain of one's lovability). The positivity of the other model indicates the degree to which others are generally expected to be available and supportive. The other model is therefore associated with the tendency to seek out or avoid closeness in relationships. On the basis of these two dimensions, four prototypic attachment patterns can be defined. Securely attached adults have positive perceptions of themselves and others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). They are dedicated to relationships, have self confidence, feel comfortable with intimacy and expect their partners to be emotionally available and attentive to their needs. Preoccupied (anxious-ambivalent) individuals tend to have a negative perception of self but a positive, albeit guarded perception of others. They have a strong need for approval of others, accompanied by a longing for intimacy and emotional ties. Fear of abandonment may lead to the search for intense intimacy and the loss of autonomy. Avoidant individuals may exhibit one of two different underlying motives (see Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Fearful avoidant individuals are characterized by both a negative perception of self and a negative perception of significant others. Although a longing for social contacts and intimacy exists, an intense fear of rejection leads to the avoidance of relationships and distrust of others. In contrast, dismissing individuals have a positive perception of self, opposed to a negative view of others. Intimacy is compromised by feelings of self-esteem and autonomy. Due to rejection in the past, emotional detachment from others is applied in order to maintain a defensive positive self-image. In time, an entirely autonomous self-image develops and dismissing individuals seem to be immune to negative experiences (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

The four-group model of attachment quickly gained support among researchers in adult attachment, as empirical evidence supported the two distinct types of avoidance (Feeney, 1999). Furthermore, moving from a three to a four-group classification appeared to be consistent with infant research in which a fourth classification had also been introduced (Crittenden 1995, Main & Solomon, 1986). Finally, the four-group

model fits nicely with the tendency to see attachment in a two dimensional space, with the distinguishing features of the dimensions being: avoidance (also called comfort with closeness) and anxiety (Feeney, 1999; Schachner, Shaver & Mikulincer, 2005).

In the present thesis, the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), one of the most common methods for measurement of adult attachment which is based on the four-group model of adult attachment, will be used for the assessment of adult attachment. In choosing the right instrument for measuring adult attachment, there are a few important points to consider. Above all, the instrument should be valid, reliable and appropriate for the participants and research questions studied. The RQ seemed to fit all our needs: as more and more evidence accumulated in favour of the four-group model of adult attachment, we wanted to use an instrument assessing adult attachment on the basis of the four-group model. Second, we were interested in attachment predominately in the domain of romantic close relationships and third, our research questions demanded that we use large groups of individuals, making alternative interview methods simply too costly and unpractical (see also the discussion of the present thesis).

The RQ was developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) as an adaptation of the self-report measure by Hazan and Shaver (1987). The standard version of the RQ consists of four short paragraphs describing the four attachment styles (i.e. secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissing attachment). Respondents are instructed to rate on 7-point scales (ranging from 1 - not at all like me to 7 - very much like me) the extent to which each prototypical description corresponds to their experiences in close relationships. In contrast to other (i.e. interview) methods for the assessment of adult attachment orientation, the RQ is a very practical measure: it is easy to administer and readily scored. Not surprisingly, therefore, the RQ has opened up a wide range of possibilities for research on adults' and adolescents' attachment orientation and it's relationship with other variables. Adult attachment as measured by the RQ has been found to be related to, among other things, relationship satisfaction, jealousy, battering in relationships, loneliness, hostility, anger, the Big Five personality factors (i.e. extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and intellect), and to depression (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski & Bartholomew, 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994; Murphy & Bates, 1997; Scharfe &

Bartholomew, 1994). These empirical findings underline the attractiveness of the RQ as a tool in studies of adult attachment.

At the time we started this study, there was no adequate Dutch measure for the assessment of adult attachment. For reasons mentioned above, the RQ was considered to be the most suitable measurement instrument. Therefore, the RQ was translated into Dutch (Pielage & Gerlsma, 2000) and was used in all studies described in the current thesis.

Aims of the current thesis

The goal of the present thesis was to thoroughly examine the relationships between adult attachment and psychosocial functioning, predominately in the realm of close relationships. As will be discussed in more detail below, the first part of the current thesis focuses on the assessment of the adult attachment construct. In Chapters 2 and 3 the stability of adult attachment in time and across various relationships in the social network will be investigated. The second part of the current thesis explores the underlying mechanisms that render insecurely attached individuals vulnerable to the development of psychological distress. Chapter 4 investigates the links between adult attachment and couples' verbal and nonverbal communication patterns during a stressful situation in a sample of dating couples and in a sample of married individuals with established relationships. In Chapter 5 the role of intimacy in the current romantic relationship as a possible mediator of the relationship between adult attachment and psychological distress will be examined in a clinical and community sample. Chapter 6 discusses two mediational models of the relationships between stressful events, attachment style and psychological distress. Finally, in Chapter 7 an overview of the main findings and conclusions of the current thesis will be summarized, and future directions for research will be proposed.

Stability of adult attachment

Although attachment theory does not assume or require that internal working models of attachment persist without change across the lifespan, both theory and empirical evidence have led researchers to emphasize a strong tendency toward stability and continuity. According to Bowlby, '*During the earliest years, features of personality crucial to*

psychiatry remain relatively open to change because they are still responsive to the environment. As a child grows older, however, clinical evidence shows that both the patterns of attachment and the personality features that go with it become increasingly a property of the child himself or herself and also increasingly resistant to change. This means that the child tends to impose it, or some derivative of it, upon new relationships' (1988b p. 5). Thus, it is assumed that internal working models of attachment, once formed, tend to persist. Change is only likely to occur in case of a significant life event with a strong emotional impact or in case of a relationship of sufficiently long duration and emotional meaning to challenge the existing working model (Bowlby, 1988a, 1988b; Collins & Read, 1990).

Several factors contribute to the stability of internal working models of attachment. Information-processing biases lead individuals to construe the world in ways that support existing models. Individuals tend to select and create environments that fit their beliefs about themselves and others and actively contribute to their interpersonal environment by adopting patterns of behaviour that create expected outcomes. In the end, working models of attachment tend to operate as self-fulfilling prophecies: They guide social interaction, colour the appraisal of one's own and others' behaviour in attachment relationships, and, as a result, affect attachment behaviour, thereby reconstructing the kind of situation that confirms earlier experiences and existent expectations. Eventually, security of attachment becomes an element of the individual's personality structure, thereby contributing to behavioural stability, both in time and across different relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Collins & Read, 1994).

Studies on the stability of adult attachment styles have shown that approximately 30% of the individuals change their attachment style over time, irrespective of the interval between measurement times (Baldwin & Fehr, 1995). While some researchers consider this finding evidence for moderate stability of adult attachment, others are led to believe that adult attachment is remarkably instable.

In Chapter 2 the question of stability of adult attachment will be addressed in more detail. Using a longitudinal, repeated measures design the stability of adult attachment styles is assessed in two studies. The major goals of the studies were two-fold: (1) to assess the stability of attachment over time both for continuous measures of attachment and for the categorical distribution of attachment, and (2) to examine

whether the stability of attachment differed for the global attachment style as compared to the relationship specific attachment style regarding the partner in the current romantic relationship.

Another issue concerning the stability of adult attachment styles is the question of stability across relationships. As described above, researchers often discuss attachment style as a stable trait and/or personality characteristic which influences a person's expectations, emotions, and behaviour in *all* close relationships. However, this conceptualization of attachment is somewhat at odds with another proposition of attachment theory which suggests that children may become attached to more than one caregiver and on the basis of (possibly different) experiences in these relationships may develop separate (and possibly different) internal models of these relationships (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, 1985; Howes, 1999; Kobak, 1994). In fact, research in developmental psychology has shown that attachment in childhood is primarily a relationship specific construct: the concordance between attachment to mother and to father is generally low (Ducharme, Doyle, Markiewicz, 2002; Fox, Kimmerly & Schafer, 1991; van IJzendoorn & DeWolff, 1997). While these findings are not in contradiction with attachment theoretical principles *persé*, it does place adult attachment theorists for an array of unanswered questions (see for instance Bretherton, 1985; Cassidy, 1999; Kobak, 1994; Lewis, 1994; Rutter, 1995, 1999). Assuming that most individuals participate in various relationships and thus are involved with multiple attachment figures across the life-span (e.g. parents, friends, lovers) the question is raised as to whether early experience leave us with a single, generalized model of attachment that contributes to the course of all later relationships or if (instead) there are specific working models associated with specific (types of) relationships (Owens et al., 1995). Collins and Read (1994) have suggested that experiences in different relationships are organised in a hierarchical network of attachment representations, with general models of self and others at the top of the hierarchy and more specific models at lower levels.

Despite the plausibility that individuals may have more than one model of relationships, adult attachment researchers continue to discuss attachment style in the singular as if individuals can have only one style of relating. Moreover, measures of attachment styles are often presented without any explicit consideration of the

specificity of the attachment relationship at hand (Cozarelli, Hoekstra & Bylsma, 2000).

In Chapter 3 we focus on attachment in the context of multiple attachment relationships in adulthood. The aims were two-fold: To examine the level of concordance between global attachment style and different attachment qualities, and secondly, to obtain information about the domains in which each of the attachment qualities would be most influential.

Attachment and psychosocial functioning

Bowlby was a child psychiatrist and his formulation of attachment theory was meant to provide insight in the way childhood attachment patterns influence the development of psychopathology in children and adults. Bowlby hypothesized that the development of internal working models of attachment is a key developmental task that not only influences a child's representations of self and other but also influences strategies for processing attachment related thoughts and feelings (Crittenden, 1995; Dozier, Stovall & Albus, 1999). As mentioned before, insecure strategies lie along attempts to deactivate (minimize) or hyperactivate (maximize) the expression of attachment needs. When children use deactivating strategies (i.e. avoidant attachment) they defensively turn attention away from their distress and therefore have limited access to their own feelings and attachment needs. In case of hyperactivating strategies (i.e. preoccupied attachment) attention is defensively turned towards their own distress, thereby creating a focus on emotions at the cost of autonomy. Either one of the strategies may leave children at a greater risk for the development of psychopathology. Deactivating strategies may lead to externalizing disorders because attention is turned away from the self, without the resolution of negative experiences. Hyperactivating strategies may predispose individuals towards internalizing disorders because attention is focused exclusively on the self (Crittenden, 1995; Dozier, Stovall & Albus, 1999).

In adults, the strategies for dealing with attachment related information become apparent in close relationships. For most individuals, a satisfying intimate relationship is the most important source of happiness and well-being (Veenhoven, 1987; Russell & Wells, 1994). Conversely, being in a distressed relationship constitutes a major risk factor

for psychopathology (Burman & Margolin, 1992). According to attachment theory, individuals with an insecure attachment style risk meeting with unsatisfactory intimate relationships which increases their vulnerability to the development of psychological and physical complaints. As Bowlby puts it: '*the psychology and psychopathology of emotion is found to be in large part the psychology and psychopathology of affectional bonds*' (1980, pg. 40).

Since the publication of Hazan and Shaver's seminal article in 1987, their research linking adult attachment to experiences in romantic relationships has been extended and replicated numerous times (for reviews see Feeney, 1999; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Indeed, there is ample evidence that adult attachment styles affect behaviours and emotions in close relationships. As adults, secure individuals report having more intimate, satisfying and enduring relationships than their insecurely attached counterparts. Secure attachment is often linked to higher levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction and interdependence in the romantic relationship. In contrast, avoidant and preoccupied (ambivalent) attachment are negatively related to trust and satisfaction, and avoidant attachment has been found to be related to low levels of interdependence and commitment (Feeney, 1999; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Simpson, 1990).

Attachment and Communication in Close Relationships

Recently, researchers have begun to stress the importance of attachment style differences in communication patterns. According to Kobak and Duemmler (1994, p.122), '*conversations may offer a valuable tool for studying attachment relationships over the life span*'. Communication is the primary way in which goal conflicts are negotiated and attachment relationships are maintained. By engaging in constructive conversation, attachment concerns may be expressed as vulnerabilities and needs for understanding that elicit a partner's support, encouragement or cooperation. In contrast, if attachment concerns remain unarticulated (as may be the case with dismissing individuals) or are indirectly expressed because an individual has difficulty verbalizing attachment related goals and needs (as is the case with preoccupied individuals), the partner may be left with a confused impression of the speaker's viewpoint or feelings which makes supportive understanding more difficult.

An attachment perspective on couples communication patterns would enhance the marital communication literature, which since long has stressed the importance of

communication in marital satisfaction in romantic relationships. However, research in this area has largely been a-theoretical and exploratory (Burman and Margolin, 1992), with researchers attempting to determine if a relationship exists without necessarily focussing on causal factors. Attachment theory could provide findings from the marital interaction literature with a strong theoretical framework, accounting for individual differences in verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, levels of intimacy and relationship satisfaction, and incorporating the link between relationship satisfaction and psychological distress.

Previous research has shown that adults with different attachment styles differ in the way they interact with their partner, especially in a stressful situation. However, the focus of these studies has generally not been on communication, let alone on the verbal *and* nonverbal communication patterns between partners in a stressful situation. The study described in Chapter 4 extends previous research on the links between self-reported adult attachment and couples communication patterns by exploring both verbal and nonverbal communication patterns in a sample of dating couples and in a sample of distressed and non-distressed couples from the general community.

Intimacy in the current romantic relationship as a mediator between attachment and psychological distress

As mentioned above, attachment theory suggests that insecurely attached individuals risk meeting with unsatisfactory close relationships and that this in turn may prove to be a risk factor for the development of psychopathology (Bowlby, 1980). In line with this hypothesis previous research has shown that insecure attachment is negatively related to relationship quality (see above; for a review see Feeney, 1999) and positively to psychological distress. Insecure attachment has been found to be associated with depression (Carnelley, Pietromonaco & Jaffe, 1994; Hammen, Burge, Daley, Davila, Paley & Rudolph, 1995; Murphy & Bates, 1997), anxiety (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Shaver & Brennan, 1992) and low self-esteem (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Dozier et al. 1999). Although a number of studies have demonstrated the predicted associations between attachment styles and relationship quality on the one hand, and between attachment styles and psychological distress on the other hand, studies that report on the interplay between these variables

are sparse. The study described in Chapter 5 was designed to examine the interrelationships between attachment, intimacy in the current romantic relationship and psychological distress, in an effort to explore the mechanism underlying the link between attachment styles and psychological distress. Given that insecurely attached individuals tend to be more vulnerable to the development of psychological complaints, the goal of the study described in Chapter 5, was to examine the extent to which this could be accounted for by a lack of intimacy in their current romantic relationship.

Levels of daily stress and attachment styles as possible mediators for psychological distress

Attachment theory predicts that attachment styles ‘learned’ in previous relational experiences affect the way people cope with stressful events, which in its turn affects their mental health. While a number of empirical studies have demonstrated the predicted associations between attachment styles and stressful events on the one hand, and between attachment styles and psychological symptoms on the other hand, these studies generally did not address the interrelationships between all three variables, i.e. attachment style, amount of stressful events and mental health. In Chapter 6, two mediational models of the relationships between stressful events, attachment style and psychopathology are investigated. The first model conceptualizes attachment style as a mediator between stressful events and psychopathology, based on the theoretical premise that stressful events activate the attachment system which, dependent on one’s previous relational experiences, i.e. one’s attachment style, may lead to adaptive or maladaptive ways of coping with the stressors (e.g., Collins & Read, 1994; Mikulincer & Florian, 1998; Simpson & Rholes, 1994). In contrast, the second model suggests that the amount of general life stress experienced by each attachment group is not necessarily similar and events are not inherently stressful. Rather, the subjective appraisal of these events plays a crucial role in the way people experience and respond to stress (e.g. Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The study described in Chapter 6 extends the work on adult attachment by analyzing the way in which stressful events and attachment style each contribute to mental health.

